



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4.30 p.m. – 8.15 p.m.

12 February 2009

Present: Councillors Stephenson (Chair), Watkins (Vice-Chair), Bradford, Cannell, Driver, Fairbairn, Jeraj, Little (A), Offord and Ramsay

Also Present: Councillors Morphew, Sands and Waters

Apologies: Councillors Blower, Fisher and Gihawi

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Councillors Stephenson, Watkins, Jeraj, Little, Offord and Sands each declared a personal interest in item 3, below, 'Statutory consultation on Earlham High School' because of their employment or association with the University of East Anglia.

Councillor Jeraj declared a personal interest in the item on 'Financial Inclusion, Debt Advisory Services and Credit Unions' because he is a member of a credit union.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the Scrutiny Committees held on 8 and 21 January 2009.

3. STATUTORY CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE OF EARLHAM HIGH SCHOOL

(Councillors Stephenson, Watkins, Jeraj, Little, Offord and Sands had declared personal interests in this item.)

(County Councillor Rosalie Monbiot, Cabinet Member for Children's Services at Norfolk County Council; Lisa Christensen, Director of Children's Services at Norfolk County Council; Dave Brunton, Head of Earlham High School; Nick Francis, Chair of Governors at Earlham High School; Dick Palmer, Principal of Norwich City College and Lead Sponsor; Edward Acton, Acting Vice-Chancellor of the University of East Anglia (UEA) and Tim Newton, Norfolk County Council, attended the meeting for this item.)

Lisa Christensen gave a short presentation on the proposals for the closure of Earlham High School and replacing it with an Academy and highlighted the timetable for the consultations and decision making. The County Council's Cabinet would make a final decision at its meeting on 15 June 2009 and subject to Government

approval the new Academy could open in September 2009, with building works scheduled for completion in 2012.

Dick Palmer explained that the Norwich City College was the lead sponsor for the Academy, in partnership with the UEA and the County Council, and an educational partner, the Norwich School. The sponsors were appointing a project management company to carry out the feasibility stage and conduct widespread consultation. It was intended that the Academy would specialise in English and digital technology, and would provide a community resource.

Members of the Scrutiny Committee then put the questions to the sponsors and the representatives of Earlham High School. The responses included the following points:-

- Construction work should not interfere with the running of the school. The County Council had experience of working with building contractors on school sites and health and safety during the construction. There would be no disruption to education. The feasibility study would determine the best location for the building on the site.
- The Academy would be an 'extended school' which would open before and after normal school hours and at weekends for extra activities. There would be no change to the school day, although some children for instance those who are carers already do start later. Any radical changes to the school day could not be implemented in isolation and would result in increased infrastructure costs.
- The UEA's short academic terms meant that that more of its facilities would be available to the Academy. Exceptional Norwich School students had access to the university's facilities and the UEA was still reflecting on the arrangements for Academy students. Teachers could benefit from the use the of the facilities.
- The reason that Earlham High School had been chosen as an Academy was that it needed a lot of investment and was in one of the most deprived wards of the county. Academy status would bring in the capital for new buildings suitable for the digital technology.
- The sponsors were making a long-term commitment to the Academy. The Board of Norwich City College made a collective agreement to commit to the vocational and general education to help people in Earlham. The UEA was one of 6 beacons for community engagement, worked with the community in many ways and the school was one of its immediate neighbours. Both the City College and the UEA would continue to put resources into supporting other schools and communities.
- The school currently collaborated in Open Opportunity with other High Schools in the area bussing pupils to the school for the day and sharing common timetabling. Students benefited from having access to different activities available in different locations.
- Other schools within Open Opportunity could benefit from the additional resources in English and digital technology at the Academy. It was

expected that further academies in the city would not provide digital technology as a specialist subject.

- Digital technology comprised computing, ICT, media and digital environmental technology. The Academy building could incorporate the latest technology. There was no tension between aspirations in literacy and digital technology which was an extension of literacy skills though such activities as web design, media and journalism.
- Any changes to the sponsors would need approval from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Sponsors could sponsor more than one academy.
- The governing body of the Academy would include a parent governor, member of the community and a representative of the Student Council. Business representatives would help support the technical and vocational side of the curriculum.
- Research showed that it was possible for exceptional teachers in non-ideal environments to improve educational attainment. However this did not necessarily attract the best teachers. The academy was however an opportunity for young people and the community.
- The Academy could have more flexibility with teachers' pay and conditions and would not need to be restricted by national pay scales. There would be a teacher representative on the governing body. TUPE regulations would apply to the transfer of staff but the feasibility study would look into that. One of the reasons for the Academy was the need for the school to be different.
- Literacy and numeracy attainment could be influenced from the experience of the UEA's creative writing course and a mentoring scheme where volunteer under and post graduates were paid, checked against criminal records, and carefully trained and monitored to work with the High School students. Coaching experience would benefit UEA students in all manner of careers. The City College had experience of applied English and Maths skills particularly in the context of 14-19 year olds, and peer mentoring where students help students in the previous year. Extended family learning was also a key aspect to literacy and numeracy attainment. There was an expectation that the Academy would work closely with feeder schools
- Funding for the new build and the establishment of the Academy was from a separate funding stream and did not impact on the school building programme elsewhere in the County and provided more opportunity to upgrade equipment than otherwise the case.
- From 2010 all funding for schools would be through the local authority and not the Learning Skills Council (LSE).
- Norwich City College was undergoing a huge project of rebuilding and had a project management team to oversee this project. The DCSF was aware that the College's Ofsted report did not meet the criteria of overall

‘outstanding’ however the College had received ‘outstanding’ for its work with 14-19 year olds and social inclusion, and excellent in community work.

Councillor Waters then addressed the Committee and said that he had strong reservations about the proposals for an academy. He would write to the sponsors for further details on the proposal. There needed to be more empirical evidence that the academy model worked. Academies were excluded from the Freedom of Information Act and there were concerns about whether procurement rules applied. Parents and students needed to be aware of the full implications.

Councillor Sands said that the Council did not object to the raising of aspirations and achievements of Earlham students. The Council was keen to support ‘Campus Norwich’ approach and consider the proposal for an academy at the site of Earlham High School but with regard to the implications on other local schools.

Lisa Christensen and Dick Palmer then responded to the issues raised.

(The sponsors for the Academy then left the meeting at this point and there was a short adjournment before the meeting reconvened. Councillor Sands also left the meeting at this point.)

Discussion ensued in which members considered whether the closure of the school would lead inevitably to an academy or that there were other alternatives, such as another school. Members welcomed that the sponsors were educators. However there was concern about the capability of the City College and UEA to concentrate on only 1-2 schools and what effect this would have on other local schools. The mentoring scheme by students was already taking place and did not need academy status to improve it.

Councillor Little, said that he represented a large area of the school’s catchment area (as Ward Councillor for Bowthorpe Ward) and considered that the investment of £20m was a very exciting, once in a lifetime opportunity for young people.

Councillor Driver pointed out that the school had been on ‘special measures’ and that this was an opportunity for the young people.

During discussion the Chair referred to the pay and conditions of staff being different under an Academy and considered that it was important that teachers were treated the same across the city. Councillor Little considered that teachers’ pay and conditions could be one detail that could be considered in the later stages but the opportunity for an Academy to replace a failing school and the massive benefits it could bring should not be denied the young people in the community.

Councillor Little moved and Councillor Driver seconded that Earlham High School should be closed and replaced with an Academy.

RESOLVED, on the Chair’s casting vote, with 3 members voting against, 3 members voting in favour and 4 members abstaining, the motion was lost and the Committee at this point in time could not support the closure of the Earlham High School and the replacement of Earlham High School with an Academy.

Councillor Ramsay then moved and Councillor Jeraj then seconded that the Committee supported the principle of greater involvement of the City College and the UEA in the running of Earlham High School whilst retaining an open mind on the proposal for an academy and putting forward the key observations from this Committee to the Executive.

RESOLVED with 4 members voting in favour, 2 members against, and 4 members abstaining to note that the Scrutiny Committee supports the principle of greater involvement of the City College and the UEA in the running of Earlham High School and ask the Executive to consider the key observations:-

- concerns that an Academy is the only way to bring about educational attainment and achievement and capital investment in school buildings and technology;
- the impact on local schools and the community;
- future sponsorship arrangements and changes to the curriculum.

4. BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2009/2010

(The Chair agreed to take this item earlier because of the adverse weather conditions.)

(Members were advised of a typographical error in the report on the 'Budget 2009/2010 General Fund', under the heading 'Process and Budget Strategy', and to amend the second sentence of the fourth paragraph by deleting 3 noughts so that the sentence reads 'It is proposed to make savings of £3,900,000, etc.')

Councillor Waters as Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance introduced the budget reports and outlined the key elements.

The Head of Finance, together with the Chief Executive and the Finance Control Manager and Councillor Waters, answered members' questions on the suite of budget reports. Members were advised that the Council needed to make £9.8m savings in the next 4 years. The Boundary Committee's announcement of extending the decision on the Unitary bid by 5 months meant that expenditure would be stretched out over this period but not result in any further expenditure. Members were advised that £800,000 was for the local government reorganisation to cover costs of secondments, consultants (where the Council does not have service experience) and there could be savings within this budget. £400,000 was for the preparation on the CityCare contract.

Discussion ensued on the rent increase for the Council's tenants.

Councillor Morphew said that the Council was in a position that if it did not put the rents up now it would store up a larger rent increase in the future. Steps were being taken to mitigate the increase for people whose income was just above benefit levels.

Members also considered the level of reserves which was being retained at £4.5m when a few years ago members considered that £3m was a safe level. The Head of Finance referred to the current economic climate and said that £½m was reserved for contingencies in future years.

Councillor Little referred to the collection rates of Council Tax and the current economic climate where more people might not be able to pay.

During discussion members considered that the budget savings did not show the proportion of the overall service budget and that it was difficult for the Committee to evaluate the impact on service delivery. Members also expressed concern that the Service Plans had not been updated and even though the Plans were available electronically, members had insufficient time to look at them. The Chief Executive confirmed that information on budgets circulated to the Group Leaders could be made available to all members of the Council.

RESOLVED to note the budget reports.

(Councillors Driver, Cannell, Bradford and Morphew left the meeting at this point.)

5. QUARTER THREE PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Director of Transformation presented the report and together with the Head of Finance answered detailed questions. One of the impacts of the economic downturn was an increase in benefit claimants and the need for extra staffing resources. The Head of Planning and Regeneration Services answered questions on the Planning Improvement Programme and its progress.

In response to a question from Councillor Offord, the Director of Transformation explained that the indicator relating to carbon emissions was a new indicator and would be reported at the end of the year. Further investigation would be made to see if this indicator was available from the Norfolk Climate Change Strategy on individual authorities' carbon footprints.

The Chief Executive explained the process of turning around voids and that some which were not in a bad state of repair could be re-let with minor works, such as repairing a kitchen door, carried out when the new tenants had moved in.

Discussion ensued on the Memorial Gardens. Councillor Waters said that the application for the refurbishment of the Gardens would be considered at the Planning Applications Committee the following week but there was an issue about the capital receipts for the project.

Councillor Jeraj expressed concern that in Appendix A – CityCare contract monitoring the quality and tenants' satisfaction was low. The Director of Transformation referred to the comments in the report and said that a future report would contain the actions being taken by CityCare to address this.

RESOLVED to note.

6. OUTSTANDING BUSINESS

RESOLVED, that more than two hours having taken place since the start of the meeting, to deal with the following items of outstanding business by the Scrutiny Officer writing to members:

- Financial Inclusion, Debt Advisory Services and Credit Unions;
- Reports Back from the Task and Finish Groups;
- Norfolk County Strategic Partnership Joint Scrutiny Panel
- Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Scrutiny Committee Work Programme.

CHAIR